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# The Classical Weekly

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## MOVING PICTURES AMONG THE ROMANS<sup>1</sup>

To a populace that found its pastime in the spectacular and brutal scenes of the amphitheater, the thrilling incidents of its history and of its stock of mythology could, without suffering in comparison with the gladiatorial combats and animal fights, be presented in pantomime or in reality by the ingenious Roman. Besides having at his disposal many underground passages and openings therefrom into the arena by means of which the whole scene could be changed in a moment, he had trained slaves under whose skilful hands elaborate stage-machinery was moved rapidly and systematically.

In the Middle Ages the Christian Church, to inculcate instruction, rendered in pantomime or in dramatic form various Biblical incidents and scenes from the lives of the Saints. Quite naturally, however, these representations did not retain their original simplicity, but developed into the spectacular Miracle and Morality plays. The Roman did not view the scenes from mythology as a means of imparting religious or moral instruction; he had, rather, an insatiate desire to see the abnormal and the terrible. The rabble at Rome was simply human and, like any mob, delighted in that which was unusual.

Such representations of the gods and heroes did not fail to evoke the disapproval and the disgust of the Christian writer Tertullian, who, in his *Apology*, Chapter 15, gives a short account of the sights to be seen in the Roman amphitheater:

'The rest of your ingenious amusements minister to your pleasures through the dishonor of your gods. Reflect upon the choice farces of your Lentuli and your Hostilii, considering whether in your jokes and your artifices you laugh at the mimes or at your gods: the lewd Anubis, the male Luna, the scourged Diana, the recital of the will of the deceased Jupiter and the three famished Herculeses held up to derision. But also the literature of the stage depicts the foulness of the gods. The Sun to your joy mourns for his boy who has been hurled from the sky, and Cybele sighs for the disdainful shepherd without a blush creeping over your faces. You also suffer the criminal record of Jupiter to be sung, and Juno, Venus, and Minerva to be judged by a shepherd. What have you to say of this, that a likeness of your god covers an ignominious and infamous head; that a body impure and by emasculation prepared for that purpose represents a certain Minerva or Hercules? Is not their majesty violated and their divinity prostituted while you

applaud? You clearly are more religious in the theater where your gods dance over human blood and over the filth resulting from conflicts, thereby affording the criminals plain facts and narratives—except that your very gods are often impersonated by malefactors. Once we saw the mutilation of Atys, that well known god from Pessinus, and one who was burning alive posed as Hercules. And in the midst of the cruel shows of the noon-day gladiators, we laughed at Mercury examining the dead with a cautery. We also see the brother of Jupiter, with a hammer in his hand, dragging out the corpses of the gladiators. But who can go through all your farces up to date one by one? If they destroy the honor of the gods, if they obliterate the traces of their majesty, such burlesques find their origin surely in the contempt in which the gods are held by those who perform them and by those for whose amusement they are performed'.

Condemned criminals had to be disposed of, and, if Rome was going to have capital punishment, why not execute the culprits in the arena and thus give public amusement? In this way they could be forced to act various parts of Greek and Roman mythology, and, in playing some of the most beautiful and pathetic rôles, they suffered the most dreadful penalties.

Besides reading in Tertullian about the rôle of Heracles, we note in one of the Greek epigrams the following about a certain Meniscus, who, in playing the part of the Grecian Samson on Mount Oeta, was burned to death (Jacobs, *Anthologia Palatina* 11.184):

'As Heracles of yore, so did Meniscus take the golden apples from the Hesperides of Zeus. And what happened? As he was apprehended, there appeared to all a great spectacle, how Heracles of old was burned to death'.

Plutarch, *De Sera Numinis Vindicta* 9, incidentally mentioning the stage, says:

'However, there are some people that differ not at all from children, who, many times beholding malefactors upon the stage in their gilded vestments and short purple cloaks as they dance with crowns upon their heads, admire and look upon them as the happiest people in the world till they see them gored and lashed, and mark flames of fire curling from underneath their sumptuous and gaudy garments'.

Neither author mentions these things as having actually happened at Rome, but we can hardly suppose that the capital would have been outdone by any city in the provinces.

It seems that showy apparel was frequently seen in the arena. When Perpetua and Felicitas<sup>2</sup> with some of their friends were taken into the amphitheatre at Carthage, in 203 A. D., the tribune threatened to clothe the men as priests of Saturn and the women as

<sup>1</sup>I wish to emphasize the caveat in Dr. Gehman's concluding paragraph. I have read something on the Inquisition, and I have seen, in the Tower of London, the implements once used by our British cousins to bring recalcitrants over to their way of thinking. We have long known, unhappily, that, at times, both ancient and modern man has been demoniacally cruel; this paper is printed not to prove that again, but to illustrate Roman ingenuity—ghastly ingenuity, indeed, but ingenuity nevertheless.

C. K.

<sup>2</sup>Passio Sanctae Perpetuae 18.

priestesses of the same god, the color of whose vestments, as Tertullian tells us (*De Testimonio Animae* 2; *De Pallio* 4), was purple and scarlet. Christian convicts sometimes were forced to represent some mythological character or to engage in some idolatrous ceremony. Thus Clement, in his *Epistle to the Corinthians* 6, speaks of Christian women who played the parts of Danaids or of Dirce in the arena. In the *Acts of Theodotus* (Ruinart, page 301) we have a case of persons who were made priests of Diana and Minerva.

Apuleius gives a rather full account of a mythological performance in the amphitheater. In his *Metamorphoses* 10.19, he tells us that a certain Lucius, who had been transformed into an ass, and his owner, Thiasus, came to Corinth, where the latter put Lucius on private exhibition, and charged a good admission. Finally, Thiasus arranged to exhibit Lucius, in a certain way, in public, at the games.

Making allowance for the exaggeration and the imagery of a vile-minded writer, let us quote the experience of Lucius as told by Apuleius, beginning with 10.29, in medio:

'And now, behold, the day destined for the show came; and amid the shouts of applause, as a long train escorted me, I was led to the amphitheater. During the first part of the performance, which was devoted to the joyous choral dances of the players, I was placed outside the gate and was glad to crop some fresh grass which grew just at the entrance, while I every now and then delighted my curious eyes with a most agreeable view of the spectacle through the open gate.

Beautiful boys and maidens, in the bloom of youth, splendidly dressed, moved with great elegance and gesture through the graceful evolutions of the Greek Pyrrhic dance. Now they revolved in a circle; now they deployed into an oblique line, with hands joined; at times they formed a wedgelike figure enclosing an open square; then they parted into two troops and went through a variety of intricate movements till they ceased at the sound of the trumpet. Then the screen was lowered, the hangings were drawn aside, and a dramatic scene was exhibited.

There was a wooden structure formed in imitation of that celebrated mountain Ida of which the poet Homer has sung. It was a fabric of considerable height, covered with turf and growing trees up to the very top, whence, by the contrivance of the artist, a fountain was made to flow and pour down a stream of water. A few goats cropped the grass, and a young man handsomely arrayed in barbaric vestments and having his head covered with a golden tiara, in resemblance of Paris, the Phrygian shepherd, appeared to be employed in pastoral pursuits. A beautiful boy then came forward, his only garment being the mantle generally worn by striplings, which covered his left shoulder. His beautiful yellow hair flowed loosely, and from the midst of it issued a pair of little golden wings; these and the caduceus he carried showed him to be Mercury. He danced forward, holding in his hand a golden apple which he presented to the performer who personated Paris; he made known to him by signs what Jove commanded, and gracefully retired. A girl of noble features, who represented the goddess Juno, then made her appearance; her head was surrounded with a white diadem, and she bore a scepter in her hand. Another then entered who could easily be recognized as Minerva, having on her head a shining helmet encircled with a wreath of olive. She raised her shield aloft and

brandished her spear as that goddess does when she is engaged in battle. After these came another female of surpassing beauty; the loveliness of her divine complexion declared her to be Venus, and Venus such as she was while yet a virgin. Her perfect form was nude, all but some charms imperfectly concealed by a gauze scarf with which the wind played amorously, sometimes uncovering the beauties beneath it, sometimes pressing it against the limbs and displaying their delicious contour. The goddess appeared in two different colors; her body was dazzlingly white, because she had descended from the heavens, while her silken garment was azure because she had emerged from the sea.

The virgins who represented the goddesses were accompanied by their respective attendants. With Juno came two young players representing Castor and Pollux, whose heads were covered with helmets of semioval form graced with a cluster of stars. She advanced, with a calm and unaffected air, to the warbling of the flute, and promised to the shepherd, with modest gestures, that she would bestow on him the rule of all Asia, if he adjudged to her the prize of beauty.

She who impersonated Minerva was attended by two armed youths, Terror and Fear, who danced before her with drawn swords. Behind her a piper played a martial air, mingling shrill and deep-braying tones, and excited the agility of the dancers as with the blast of the trumpet. With restless head and threatening glances, Pallas bounded forward and with animated gestures signified to Paris that, if he pronounced her victorious in the contest of beauty, she would render him illustrious for his valor and his achievements in war.

Greeted with vast applause from the spectators, Venus advanced with a sweet smile and stood still in a graceful attitude in the middle of the stage, surrounded by a throng of merry little boys, such plump, round-limbed, fair-skinned little fellows, you would have sworn that they were real Cupids who had just flown from heaven or from the sea; for they had little wings and arrows and all other accouterments conformable, and they carried glowing torches before their mistress, as if to light her way to a nuptial banquet. She had also in her train a lovely choir of virgins, the charming Graces and the Hours, who strewed the path of their goddess with loose flowers and bouquets and propitiated the queen of pleasure with the pleasant offerings of the spring.

Presently the flutes began to breathe soft Lydian airs that thrilled the audience with delight; but greater still was their pleasure when Venus began to move in concert with the music and with slow lingering steps and gentle sinuous flexure of the spine and head and graceful movements of the arms to respond to the soft modulations of the flutes; now her eyes swam with voluptuous languor, now they flashed with the ardor of passion; sometimes she seemed to dance with the eyes alone. As soon as she had approached close to the judge, she was understood to promise, by the movements of her arms, that, if she should be preferred to the other goddesses, she would bestow on Paris a wife surpassing all other women in beauty, in a word, one like herself. Gladly then did the young Phrygian deliver to her, as a token of her victory, the golden apple he held in his hand . . . . After that judgment of Paris was finished, Juno and Minerva retired from the stage in sorrow and anger, and showed by their gestures the indignation they felt at being rejected; but Venus, full of joy and merriment, testified her gladness by dancing with all her choir. Then wine mixed with saffron burst from the summit of the mountain through a pipe that lay concealed, and, flowing in scattered streams, besprinkled, as it fell, with an odoriferous shower the goats that fed around and changed their

native whiteness to a more beautiful yellow tint. And now as the theater was exhaling a sweet odor, a chasm of the earth absorbed the wooden mountain.

One of the soldiers now ran down the street to fulfill the demands of the people and bring from the public prison the woman before mentioned, who, as I have stated, was condemned to the wild beasts on account of her manifold crimes, and was destined to be my illustrious bride. What was intended also to be our resting-place was already prepared. It was brilliantly adorned with the Indian tortoise-shell, swelling with feathery heaps, and decorated with a silken coverlet. As for me, besides the shame of being thus publicly exhibited and besides the contact of that wicked and polluted woman, I was also in the highest degree tormented with the fear of death; for it struck me that, if during the progress of the play any wild beast should be let in on purpose to destroy the woman, it would not be so remarkably well trained or sagacious or so temperate and abstemious as to tear to pieces the woman who was at my side and spare me as being uncondemned and guilty of no crime.

I was alarmed, therefore, not on grounds of delicacy alone, but also on account of my life. While my master was intent on preparing for the representation and some of the servants were engaged in getting ready for the spectacle of hunting and others in gazing at the grandeur of the show, I, since no one thought that so tame an ass required to be so very attentively watched, so that I was free to follow my own devices, little by little stole away softly and quietly.

Turning from this fictitious account of a pantomime which probably had some basis of fact, we pass to Martial and Suetonius. When Nero gave his games in the wooden amphitheater in the region of the Campus Martius, no one was killed, not even any of the criminals. Then the incident of Pasiphae, the wife of Minos, was rendered so realistically that many of the spectators believed that she was actually covered by a bull as she was hidden in a wooden frame resembling a heifer (Suetonius, Nero 12). Martial, *De Spectaculis* 5, tells us that Domitian also represented in the amphitheater the connection between Pasiphae and the Cretan bull.

Friedländer, in his note to Martial, *De Spectaculis* 8, thinks that probably Domitian's scene of Pasiphae was followed by that of Daedalus. How the whole performance was enacted, we do not know, although we may presume that it was rendered with such realism that the spectators could understand it. Possibly, however, to introduce blood, Daedalus did not escape with his wings. Martial thus taunts the unfortunate man (*De Spectaculis* 8): 'Daedalus, being thus mangled by the Lucanian bear, how you could wish that you had your wings with you now!'

With Daedalus we associate his unfortunate son Icarus, and, at the games of Nero mentioned above, we find that the latter's rôle was represented. The actor, however, was unfortunate, and, in his first attempt at flight, fell down near the Emperor's seat and sprinkled his Highness with blood (Suetonius, Nero 12).

The epigrammatist tells us that under Domitian the Romans were favored with a scenic representation of Orpheus. We may suppose that the joys of the bard and Eurydice were depicted in all splendor until

she died and went to the lower world. Orpheus followed his wife to reclaim her, but he came back without her, as Martial, *De Spectaculis* 21 b, narrates: 'Are we surprised that the earth yawned suddenly to send out Orpheus? He came from his Eurydice who had been compelled to return to the depths'. While he was on earth, all nature was enchanted by the music of Orpheus, and elaborate stage-machinery was required to execute the scene depicted by Martial, *De Spectaculis* 21:

'Whatever Rhodope is said to have beheld in the theater of Orpheus, Caesar, the arena has displayed to you. Rocks crept along, and a forest, as wonderful as is believed to have been the grove of the Hesperides, moved rapidly. Every species of wild animals was present, mixed with the domestic animals, and many a bird hovered over the bard. But he himself lay prostrate, mangled by an ingrate bear. Only this part of the action was done contrary to the story'.

Although the splendor of the scene was fascinating, a mob that loved excitement could not fail to be thankful to the ingrate bear that gave the story such an unexpected turn.

Again, changes were made in the mythology without involving the death of the actor. For instance, Martial, *De Spectaculis* 16, tells us of a bull that bore Hercules to the sky:

'It was not a contrivance of art, but rather of piety that the bull, snatched up from the middle of the arena, departed to the skies. The bull once bore Europe over his brother's seas, but now a bull has borne Hercules to the stars. Compare, Fame, the bullocks of Caesar and Jupiter. Granted that they bore an equal burden, <the Emperor's> bore it the higher'.

It is probable that, in 1.6. 1-2, Martial refers to a scene in the arena showing Ganymede being carried away by an eagle. What part the boys played who were lifted up to the awning by machinery, as Juvenal notes (4.122), we do not know. It is possible that they assumed the characters of Cupids or of Icarus.

The great bandit Laureolus, it seems, appealed vividly to the Roman imagination. On the day before the murder of Caligula, there was a pantomimic performance of the crucifixion of this freebooter, and as a great deal of fictitious blood was shed around Laureolus and Cinyras (a character in a play following the crucifixion), the event was considered a prodigy (compare Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 19.1. 13, Suetonius, *Caligula* 57). From the numerous references to Laureolus, we may assume that the incident was reproduced quite frequently. Juvenal (8. 187) mentions a certain nobleman, Lentulus, who acted Laureolus, and so for imitating a slave's rôle deserved to be crucified in reality. Tertullian (*Adversus Valentianos* 14) also refers to the affair of the famous robber. Martial, *De Spectaculis* 7, gives a very graphic description of the occurrence as it was presented in the time of Domitian:

'Just as Prometheus, bound to the Scythian crag, fed the bird that never left him with the flesh of his breast that was ever in excess, so a Laureolus hung on a real cross and offered his vitals to the Caledonian

bear. He was still alive though his joints were torn, while his members were dripping with blood, and in his whole body there was nowhere any semblance of a body. At length he received the punishment he deserved. He had been guilty of piercing with his sword a parent's, or, if you will, a master's throat, or in his madness plundered temples of their hidden gold, and to thee, Rome, applied fell torches. The polluted wretch has outdone the crimes of ancient story, and for him a punishment of fable became reality'.

Besides having pantomimic representations of robbers, we have an instance where the brigand himself paid the penalty. Strabo informs us (6.2.6) of a certain Selurus, known as the Son of Aetna, who had for a long time committed his depredations in Sicily, and, being eventually captured, was sent to Rome. The geographer himself saw the execution, which took place in connection with some gladiatorial combats in the forum. As though he were standing on his native Aetna, the bandit was placed on a lofty and fragile scaffold, which collapsed beneath his weight. He fell in the midst of rickety cages, which, filled with wild animals, had been placed beneath the scaffold for the occasion. The animals easily broke out and mangled the culprit.

It appears that the incident of Mucius Scaevola was very popular and was repeated several times under Domitian. Here the criminal taking the rôle of the daring assassin unflinchingly held his hand in the flames, as Martial tells us (8.30):

'What is now seen as a spectacle in the arena of Caesar, in the time of Brutus was the height of glory. Do you see how bravely the hand grasps the flames and enjoys the punishment and reigns in the astonished fire? He himself is there as a spectator of himself and glories in the noble destruction of his right hand. But, if the punishment had not been denied him against his will, his left hand, more cruel to itself, was ready to go into the weary flames. After such an achievement, I am sorry to know what he did before. For me it suffices to know this hand as I have seen it'.

In 10.25, Martial refers to a performance of the same event, but in this case, after knowing the alternative offered to the culprit, the poet does not consider the feat anything wonderful:

'If that Mucius who was recently seen in the arena in the morning and who placed his own members into the flames to you appears enduring, stern, and brave, you have the sense of the commons of Abdera. For, when in the presence of the *tunica molesta* the command comes, "Burn your hand", it is a greater thing to say, "I won't do it" '.

Sometimes the arena was flooded and transformed into a lake, and then the Romans beheld Leander swimming to his beloved Hero (Martial, *De Spectaculis* 25). It is needless to assume that the swimmer actually said, 'Spare me in my haste, drown me on my return', but doubtless the man was allowed to struggle in the water until he was exhausted and drowned.

Again, according to Martial, *De Spectaculis* 26, in the flooded arena a band of Nereids represented a ship in full sail. Probably no ship was on the water,

but it was left to the imagination of the spectators, the maidens being arranged in such groups as readily to suggest a ship with its accessories. Some appear to have formed the outline of the ship and swelling sails, while others were arranged in ranks like the oars and the rowers. One band formed a trident, another a curved anchor, while two bore torches in their rôle of the Dioscuri.

Performances sometimes were given at night, and possibly the representations of Leander and the Nereids were part of a nocturnal programme. The word *nocturna*, in Martial, *De Spectaculis* 25.1, suggests a night scene, unless, knowing the story of Leander, the spectators imagined it was night while the play was really given in the daytime. The Dioscuri certainly would have been more effective at night. Suetonius (Caligula 27, at the end) records that under Caligula a nocturnal scene was rendered in which the stories of the infernal regions were exhibited by Egyptians and Ethiopians. The Romans did not lack means of illumination; for Statius tells us (*Silvae* 1.6. 85 ff.) that at the Saturnalia of 90 A. D. the amphitheater was brilliantly illuminated (compare also Lucilius, *Frag.* 111Baehrens).

These were but a few of the amusements of the Roman people in the decadence of the stern spirit represented by Cato. And yet a recital of the events portrayed in the Roman amphitheater does not justify us in forming the conclusion that the Roman was coarser or more brutal than other races; considering the age in which he lived, he certainly does not suffer in comparison with the American people. In our Colonial period the stocks, the pillory, and the whipping-post stood in the public square, and their victims were pelted by the rabble. A public hanging would draw a crowd from miles around. Nor can we assume that he was more extravagant than we are, when we consider that in Jersey City, July 2, 1921, the receipts for admission to the Dempsey-Carpentier fight were approximately \$1,600,000. The Romans enjoyed the spectacles of the amphitheater just as much as modern people find pleasure in watching the pictures projected on the screen by the cinematograph. In Rome, however, we note a decrease of seriousness of purpose and the decay of the national spirit. With the spread of the Roman arms and the importation of luxuries, the populace found its highest pleasure and satisfaction in public grain and games. Instead of the patriotic Roman of the times of the Punic Wars, we find in process of development a different character, whose main concern is not how the legions fare on the frontiers, but whether the Blues or the Greens have won the day in the Circus.

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## REVIEWS

Memoirs of The American Academy in Rome. Volume I: School of Classical Studies 1915-1916. Bergamo Istituto Italiano D'Arti Grafiche (1917). Pp. 172. Plates 54. \$5.00.